

**CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE HABITAT RELATIONSHIPS SYSTEM**  
**maintained by the**  
**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME**  
**and supported by the**  
**CALIFORNIA INTERAGENCY WILDLIFE TASK GROUP**  
**Database Version 8.1 (2005)**

---

B108 Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*  
Family: Cathartidae Order: Cinconiiformes Class: Aves

Written by: G. Ahlborn  
Reviewed by: L. Kiff  
Edited by: L. Kiff, G. Ahlborn

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Common in breeding season throughout most of California. Absent to uncommon in most of state in winter, with greatest concentrations in coastal regions. Not found at highest elevations in Sierra Nevada. Occurs in open stages of most habitats that provide adequate cliffs or large trees for nesting, roosting, and resting.

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Primarily eats carrion; rarely rotting fruit, live birds, eggs, or live mammals. A highly specialized static soarer, foraging aerially over roads, fields, open forests, and nearly all open habitats. Searches for carrion from the air and from a perch, aided by sense of smell. May rob young herons of food (Temple 1969).

**Cover:** Large trees, rock outcrops, and riparian thickets are used for roosting, perching, and sunning.

**Reproduction:** Cliffs, rock outcrops with rims, ledges, and cavities in trees, snags, and logs used for nesting.

**Water:** Drinks occasionally (Brown and Amadon 1968). Captives have been observed for 6-12 mo without free water (Hatch 1970).

**Pattern:** Suitable habitat consists of extensive open areas with protected nest and roost sites provided by large trees, snags, thickets, shrubs, and rock outcrops.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Migrates south or downslope for winter. Some individuals in coastal regions winter in California. Remainder of population migrates, mostly to Central America, for the winter. Large flocks concentrate along well defined, traditional migration routes in autumn.

**Home Range:** No data found, but observations indicate turkey vulture uses extensive areas. Individuals regularly forage out 24-32 km (15-20 mi) from roost or nest.

**Territory:** Little evidence of territoriality found. In California, as many as 500 juveniles observed using communal roosts August through October.

**Reproduction:** A ritualized display including several individuals may precede mating (Loftin

and Tyson 1965, Brown and Amadon 1968). Lays 1 clutch/ yr of 2 eggs, rarely 1 or 3. Incubates 38-41 days (Brown and Amadon 1968). Semialtricial young hatch with eyes open; cared for by both parents for 80 days, or more.

Niche: Often feeds with ravens and condors, although apparently subordinate to each. Golden eagles and coyotes may keep turkey vulture from carcasses.

## REFERENCES

- Bent, A. C. 1937. Life histories of North American birds of prey. Part 1. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 167. 409pp.
- Brown, L., and D. Amadon. 1968. Eagles, hawks and falcons of the world. 2 Vols. Country Life Books, London. 945pp.
- Coles, V. 1944. Nesting of the turkey vulture in Ohio caves. Auk 61:219-228.
- Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye. 1988. The birder's handbook. Simon and Schuster, New York. 785pp.
- Garrett, K., and J. Dunn. 1981. Birds of southern California. Los Angeles Audubon Soc. 408pp.
- Grinnell, J., and A. H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. Pac. Coast Avifauna No. 27. 608pp.
- Hatch, D. E. 1970. Energy conserving and heat dissipating mechanisms of the turkey vulture. Auk 87:111-124.
- Loftin, H., and E. L. Tyson. 1965. Stylized behavior in turkey vulture courtship dance. Wilson Bull. 77:193.
- McKelvey, M. 1965. Unusual bathing habits of the turkey vulture. Condor 67:265.
- Temple, S. A. 1969. A case of turkey vulture piracy on great blue herons. Wilson Bull. 81:94.
- Work, T. H., and A. J. Wool. 1942. The nest life of the turkey vulture. Condor 44:149-159.